

# **“But if you tell somebody, the hurt disappears”**

*A qualitative study of how unaccompanied refugee minors cope with their problems during adaptation in Norway*

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## **PREFACE**

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1. Supervisor Brit Oppedal
2. Supervisor Reidar Ommundsen

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explored how unaccompanied refugee minors cope with difficulties in the process of adaptation. More specifically, the first aim was to identify whether they face difficulties in their everyday lives in Norway, and to explore the nature of these difficulties. The second aim was to look at the coping strategies they may apply in relation to the problems. A qualitative, descriptive, phenomenological design was applied. Ten Somali boys coming to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers were interviewed with the Private Theory Interview. They were recruited from six municipalities in the eastern part of Norway and had stayed between two and seven years in Norway at the time of the interview. Results show that this group of unaccompanied refugee minors strives with problems of poor economy, longing for their families in Somalia and discriminating treatment from others. Further findings show that they apply a wide spectre of coping strategies, mostly adaptive coping strategies, and that there are differences in the ways they cope with different problems. Informants seem to choose appropriate coping strategies to fit each specific difficulty they face. Findings indicate the importance of acknowledging unaccompanied refugee minors' resources, to be attentive to their needs and at the same time be cautious not to make them passive.

## INTRODUCTION

Among the estimated 8,4 million refugees worldwide, approximately half of them are children (UNHCR, 2006). Refugee experiences can range from relatively benign, such as the migration of political or religious groups in intact families, to the horrific, including genocide, massive destruction, and the dissolution of community and family groups (Athey and Ahearn, 1991). Child refugees are not a homogenous population and vary along a number of dimensions. They may face very different experiences depending on whether they are alone, accompanied by non-related individuals, or by some of all of their family members (Sourander, 1998). One group of child refugees leave their home countries alone, without their parents and settle down in a foreign country, separated from their family and with their cultural roots cut off (Athey and Ahearn, 1991). Unaccompanied refugee minors are children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver (SCEP, 2004). During the years 2000 – 2006 about 4000 unaccompanied minors entered Norway (UDI, 2007).

Unaccompanied refugee children are at highest risk for mental health problems because of the connection between traumatic experiences, separation from significant others and broken emotional relationships (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988). As refugees who have fled their home country, they experience losses in a number of ways; loss of family, friends, school, their local environment, cultural identity, values and habits (Berman, 2001). Traumatic experiences are very often part of their backgrounds from their home countries (Sourander, 1998). Also the journey to the host country can be difficult and dangerous. These children and youths are often dependent on human traffickers when they are crossing the borders to Europe (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2005). The challenges of finding their place in a completely new society and adapting to a new culture are demanding (Kohli & Mather, 2003). These youths therefore risk ending up disappointed because they realise that achieving the goals, dreams, tasks and plans they brought along to the new country may be difficult to materialize (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007).

Separation and loss of important attachment figures at a young age is identified as a risk factor for mental distress and unfavourable development (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Investigations of infant attachment are fruitful for understanding the general pattern of close relationships across lifespan. This is showed by Bowlby's general theory of attachment, and

Ainsworth observation of human infants who had been exposed to brief periods of separation from their mothers in unfamiliar environment (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Many unaccompanied refugee minors experience the separation from parents at the same time as the formation of identity takes place. According to Erikson, identity formation takes place through a process of exploration and commitment that usually occurs during adolescence. This phase of searching leads to a decision or a commitment in various areas, for example occupation, religion and political orientation (Eriksson, 1968). Embedded in the general identity development, is an intensified exploration of the meaning of one's ethnicity. This exploration is usual in ethnic minority and immigrant youth (Phinney, 1990), and is part of the process of acculturation. Acculturation covers all the changes that arise following "contact" between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds (Sam, 2006). In most cases only moderate difficulties are experienced in the process of acculturation because different psychological processes, such as coping strategies, are available to the acculturating individual (Berry & Sam, 1997). Still, mental health problems do often arise during acculturation (Berry, 1991).

The combination of separation from significant others and this group's challenges both in their homeland, during the flight and in the country of exile, make unaccompanied refugee minors vulnerable. As unaccompanied children and adolescents, they have to cope with all the challenges mentioned above on their own in addition with their own suffering from a lasting loss and fundamental loneliness (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007). Nevertheless, this group has not been studied broadly. Studies report how unaccompanied refugee minors are a high risk group for the development of emotional problems, such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms (e.g. Bean et al., 2006; Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007; Felsman, Leong, Johnson, & Felsman, 1990; Sourander, 1998). In contrast Kohli & Mather (2003) argue that the aspect of refugee children's capacity to respond robustly to stresses they experience is under-reported in comparison to the emphasis on vulnerability. But studies do also report that most unaccompanied refugee minors function quite well (Eide, 2000; Engebrigtsen, 2002; Geltman, Grant-Knight, Mehta, Lloyd-Travaglini, Lustig, Landgraf, et al., 2005; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Rousseau, Said, Gagne, & Bibeau, 1998; van Wijk-Zielstra 2001 & Snijders, 1995 cited in Wold, 2002; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005).

These studies show that unaccompanied refugee minors function well in school and leisure activities, carry capacities that can help them to recover and settle after arrival, and manage to

deal with the problems that typically face refugees. Even though, these studies have also detected serious disturbances such as post-traumatic stress symptoms in unaccompanied refugee minors.

It is necessary to make a distinction between asylum seekers and refugees before continuing. An asylum seeker is a person who on his or her own initiative, and without prior notification, asks the authorities for protection and recognition as a refugee. The person is called an asylum seeker until a decision has been made on the application. In the legal sense, the term “refugee” applies to resettlement refugees and asylum seekers who have been granted asylum. In connection with refugee assistance in Norway, the term “refugee” is used for resettlement refugees and persons who, following an application for asylum, have been granted asylum, protection or residence on humanitarian grounds (Varvin, 2003). This holds also for most of the participants in the present study who are referred to as “unaccompanied refugee minors”. For participants who are older than 18 years of age is this term not correct. But since the participants came to Norway as unaccompanied minors asylum seekers, they are named unaccompanied refugee minors in the present study.

Only a few studies have examined how this special group of young immigrants is coping with the comprehensive challenges they face (Goodman, 2004; Granly, 1995; Kohlie & Mather, 2003; Rousseau et al., 1998; Sutton, Robbins, Senior & Gordon, 2006; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005). Research in Norway has so far only touched the surface of this theme (Eide, 2000; Fladstad, 1993; Hjelde & Stenerud, 1999; Knudsen, 1992; Skagen, 1998 cited in Schancke, 1995). Eide (2000) thoroughly examined the growing up-situation for unaccompanied refugees in Norway, especially in relation to school and daily care situation. He used register data of e.g. education, work, income and relation to the child welfare from 511 unaccompanied refugee minors and interviewed 25 unaccompanied refugee minors. Eide found that coping and social relationships have a conclusive importance for these youths’ situation. Here coping was defined as to what degree these youths succeeded with education and work. Unfortunately Eide’s study did not look at the personal capacities of coping in these youths, except from how they succeeded in school and work, and couldn’t therefore explain why some of his informants did well in spite of extensive adversities. One of Eide’s main recommendations includes building preventive initiatives in relation to promote coping and social relationships in the group. Still, it needs to be clarified in which way

unaccompanied refugee minors are coping with the challenges they face and how to promote functional coping strategies in this group of youths.

### **Conceptualizations of coping**

Coping strategies can be conceptualized as cognitive and behavioural efforts that are used by an individual to reduce the effects of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus & Folkman defined coping as “Constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Here coping is viewed as an ongoing dynamic process. From a process perspective, coping changes over time and in accordance with the situational contexts in which it occurs (Lazarus, 1993). This definition is the most widely cited conceptualization of coping, and has been the basis for many investigations of coping in childhood and adolescence (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen and Wadsworth, 2001).

The concept of self-efficacy put forward by Bandura, refers to a person’s belief that he or she is able to perform a particular action (Bandura, 1986). The concept is similar to coping in the way that personal efficacy affect what courses of action people choose, how much effort they will put forth in a given attempt and how much stress they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands (Bandura, 1986). Many factors may facilitate or hinder behaviour performance. Some of these factors, e.g. skills and willpower are internal to the individual, while others, such as task demands and actions of another person, are located in the social environment. Perceived behavioural control is important for the way in which people cope (Ajzen, 2002). The distinction between internal and external causes of behaviour can have important implications. Responsibility for failure or success is attributed to the actor when perceived as caused by internal factors, e.g. ability or effort, but less when perceived to be due to external factors, e.g. task difficulty or luck (Ajzen, 2002). Compas et al. (1993) further claims that which coping strategy youths apply depends on whether the stressful event is interpersonal (e.g. conflicts with friends) or non-interpersonal (e.g. performance on a school exam). The reason for this is that the interpersonal events may be less controllable than non-interpersonal events and these events will elicit use of different coping strategies.



### **Coping in children and youths**

Successful adaptation to stress includes the ways in which individuals manage their emotions and think constructively, regulate and direct their behaviour and act on the social and non-social environments to modify or decrease the source of stress (Compas et al., 2001). Compas et al. (2001) have provided the most widely representative and applicable model of coping during late childhood and adolescence. The model includes three categories of coping strategies. The first category, called 'primary control coping', involves active coping efforts aimed at achieving some degree of personal control over the stressful aspects of the situation and one's emotions. The second dimension, labelled 'accommodative coping', 'distraction' or 'secondary control coping', involves coping responses to adapt to the situation, e.g. through cognitive methods of reframing, acceptance or distraction through positive thoughts or activities. The third dimension involves coping efforts that try to avoid or disengage from the stressor or one's emotions. This category has been labelled 'avoidance', 'passive coping' or 'disengagement coping' (Compas et al., 2001).

### **Adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies**

Most approaches to coping distinguish between problem- and emotion focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies centred on problem solving are aimed at doing something to change the stressful situation. Coping strategies centred on emotion refer to strategies aimed at reducing psychological discomfort by simply avoiding the harmful stimulus without trying to modify the situation (Dumont & Provost, 1999). Lazarus (2000) emphasizes that it is misleading to separate problem-focused and emotion-focused coping and to compare their efficacy, because both strategies work interdependently together.

Still, coping strategies in children and youth have been evaluated. Coping responses like seeking information, advices and support, trying to solve the problem and reflecting about the problem are found to reduce the negative effects of demanding experiences and has been called adaptive. Coping strategies like trying to suppress, escape the problem by use of alcohol or avoid the problem can increase stress and contribute to long-term persistent negative outcomes, called maladaptive (Compas, Orosan, & Grant, 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2004). But also strategies of avoidance and suppression may be meaningful ways of handling certain stressors in some situations, because whether coping strategies are adaptive or maladaptive may depend on the stressors they are used in relation to (Compas et al., 1993;

Seiffge-Krenke, 2004). That is why psychologists need to study how both problem-oriented and emotion-oriented strategies of coping work together and how they affect each other, to better understand how people cope (Lazarus, 2000).

The development of adaptive coping strategies is believed to be positive to mental health (Skre, Arnesen, Breivik, Johnsen, Verplanken, & Wang, 2007). How children and youths are coping with stress is central also in the resilience research (e.g. Dumont & Provost, 1999; Leontopoulou, 2006; Waaktaar, Christie, Borge, & Torgersen, 2004). Resilience is defined as an individual's positive adaptation, or demonstration of normal development, despite severe adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). A primary distinction between the concepts of coping, competence and resilience is that coping refers to processes of adaptation, competence refers to the characteristics and resources that are needed for successful adaptation and resilience is reflected in outcomes for which competence and coping have been effectively used in response to stress and adversity (Compas et al, 2001). In this report it has been focused on adaptation and consequently the theory of resilience has not been elaborated.

### **Differences and similarities in coping as a function of ethnicity**

Ethnicity can influence how stressful events are coped with and perceived. Relatively few studies compare young people's coping behaviour across different cultural communities, due to limited samples with regard to ethnic- and socioeconomic diversity (Compas et al., 2001; Gelhaar, Seiffge-Krenke, Borge, Cicognani, Cunha, Loncaric et al., 2007). Both similarities (Galaif, Sussman, Chou & Wills, 2003; Gelhaar et al., 2007; Gibson-Cline, 1996; Prelow, Weaver & Swenson, 2006) and differences (Bjorck, Cuthbertson, Thurman, & Lee, 2001; Choi, Meininger & Roberts, 2006; Copeland and Hess, 1995; Frydenberg, Lewis, Kennedy, Ardila, Frindte, & Hannoun, 2003; Markstrom, Marshall, & Tryon, 2000; Seiffge-Krenke & Shulman, 1990; Tam & Lam, 2005; Vaughn & Roesch, 2003) in the coping of ethnic groups have been found. Unfortunately, these studies have in common that they failed to cover the differentiated coping strategies according to the specific stressor at hand, and asked only for general coping behaviour and the ways in which people habitually cope with stress. Studies which provide information of the source of the stress and the particular coping strategy used may give valuable insight into how adolescents acquire specific coping strategies because coping is situation specific (Compas, Malcarne, & Fondacaro, 1988; Copeland & Hess, 1995).

They may also contribute to the understanding of the coping challenges and strategies of unaccompanied refugee minors.

### **Situation-specific coping in youths of different ethnicities**

Some researchers have tried to solve this limitation by studying situation-specific coping in youths with different cultural background (e.g. Bjorck et al., 2001; Gelhaar et al., 2007; Seiffge-Krenke and Shulman, 1990; Tam and Lam, 2005). Loss appraisal was found to predict seeking social support, religious coping and higher scores for accepting responsibility, distancing and self-control among Caucasian-Americans, Korean-Americans and Filipino-Americans (Bjorck et al., 2001). These findings support the view that, when a loss occurred in the past, and an active coping strategy probably is least helpful, passive coping behaviours are mobilized (Bjorck et al., 2001). Further findings from youths in different European countries show that active coping was connected to peer-related stressors and future related problems, while withdrawal coping (avoidance and distraction) was connected to self-related stressors (Gelhaar et al., 2007). These findings may be surprising according to theories of the importance of perceived behavioural control on the way in which people cope (Ajzen, 2002). Self-related stressors would be expected to involve factors that are internal to the individual, and thus involve more active coping because perceived behavioural control is high. It may be these self-related stressors were of the kind the youths could not deal with by themselves.

To conclude, we might expect that comparable stress profiles and coping styles will be found in the unaccompanied refugee minors who are the focus of the present study. However, even if these studies have investigated situation-specific coping, one may still ask if people cope with real life stressors in the same way as they report the way they cope with hypothetical stressors. Except from the study by Bjorck et al. (2001), just hypothetical stressors were studied. Only data on real life stressors and situation specific coping strategies will allow for this.

### **Qualitative studies of coping in unaccompanied refugee minors**

It is hard to grasp the knowledge of coping in relation to real stressors without being in dialogue with informants. Employing a qualitative method to the study of coping facilitates the exploration of subject's narratives about how they deal with stressful situations, without a priori taxonomy of coping. The exploratory study of coping in a group of youths that

experience loss, trauma and other adversities to an extent most people would think is unbearable may shed light on general human resources. Interviews are particularly well suited to provide a richer understanding of the context in which coping takes place, coping responses are done, and different coping responses are combined (Compas et al., 2001). When Ungar (2005) reviewed literature on resilience in children and youths, he found that it has made very little use of children's own understandings and perspectives of across cultures and of their active contributions to their well-being and coping. He claims that given the complexity of the issues under consideration and the diversity of children's lives in different circumstances, it is crucial to give attention to these children's experiences and perspectives (Ungar, 2005). Also Halcon, Robertson, Savik, Johnson, Spring, Butcher et al., (2004), who studied trauma and coping in Somali and Oromo refugee youths by use of a survey, recommend qualitative studies. Halcon et al. found that many of the youths were coping well and demonstrated remarkable strengths as survivors of war and torture. They pointed to the need of additional qualitative studies, especially focus groups and in-depth interviews to further explore the strengths and coping skills, as well as the meaning and implications of the findings (Halcon et al., 2004).

Only a few qualitative studies have looked at unaccompanied minors and their coping strategies in the process of adaptation in the host country (Goodman, 2004; Granly, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Sutton, Robbins, Senior & Gordon, 2006; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005). Coping was only partly the focus in a qualitative follow up study on 34 unaccompanied refugees between the age of 16 and 26 years old, resettled in Sweden (Wallin & Ahlström, 2005). Participants in the study used mainly emotion-focused coping to deal with earlier traumatic memories and current distress in everyday life. Emotion-focused coping was e.g. seeking social support which seemed to be an important buffer for many of the participants. They also used to avoid earlier memories and experiences by forgetting them. Other strategies used were positive comparison and religion. Participants with poor sense of well-being often used escaping strategies such as staying up at nights, sleeping during the days, drinking alcohol or filling the days with so much work with no time to think about one's difficulties (Wallin & Ahlström, 2005).

Goodman (2004) interviewed fourteen unaccompanied refugee boys aged 16 to 18 from Sudan, who had stayed in USA for only 6 to 12 months. The study focused on the participants' coping of traumas and hardship they experienced in Sudan, and not on their

adaptation processes in the United States. The four themes related to the participants' coping strategies were identified as: "collectivity and the communal self", "suppression and distraction", "making meaning" and "emerging from hopelessness to hope". Feelings of collectivity and community provided strong protection against the traumas and hardships experienced by the participants. Suppression and distraction were the main coping strategies the participants used, and voluntary suppression of thoughts and feelings was a means of changing an unbearable reality. Further the participants found meaning in their cultural and religious beliefs regarding suffering and life. Then hoping for and planning for the future became a major force for survival and helped the participants bear the hardship and boredom of the refugee camps.

Rousseau et al. (1998) used ethnographic data and interviews with ten boys between the age of 13 and 18 from the northern part of Somalia, who had arrived in Canada as unaccompanied refugees. The focus of the study was the participant's processes of resilience and coping seen in the light of the collective mechanisms of this specific culture. Results showed that their strategies often reflected their wish to find an entry point acceptable to both adults of their own community and the welfare authorities of the host community. Strategies like running away and verbal abuse against e.g. female social workers are taken into use. This behaviour can be interpreted as both examples of deviant behaviour, or as proof of being able to cope in a difficult situation (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Sutton et al. (2006) interviewed eight unaccompanied refugees to explore participants' subjective experiences of positive change processes in adapting to life in exile following their survival of multiple traumas. Participants were resettled in the UK at the time of the study. The study partly focused on coping, which was one of four main themes revealed as variables influencing these youths process of positive change. They identified social support, activities and religion as being important in this process. Social support influenced the process of positive change in the way that it helped the participants to process what had happened. Putting the trauma into words made them reach a greater understanding. Secondly participants compared themselves with others perceived to be less well-off. This appeared to help the youths to recognise and appreciate own strength and resiliency. In addition participants reported the importance for them to have someone to confide their worries to and who could offer comfort. Engaging in pleasurable activities influenced the process of positive change in ways of distracting the participants from distressing memories and being a way of managing strong affective states. Religion and religious beliefs was the last dimension of the process

of positive change. Religion functioned as a guide for how to lead one's life, and facilitated the development of meaning in relation to the trauma. These findings give emphasis to the importance of helping young people to access a wide range of supportive networks, and also providing the youths with the possibilities of talking about the trauma they experienced (Sutton et al., 2006).

Also Granly examined how unaccompanied refugee minors faced challenges in the process of adaptation and integration. Seven youths from Sri Lanka, Iran, Eritrea and Somalia were interviewed about their past, present and future, and a narrative analysis was applied. Focus was on coping and creation of meaning in life. Positive thinking, struggling, being self-reliant, learning the language and social support were some of the coping strategies brought up in the interviews. Experiences of satisfactory personal development and of personal agency characterize their stories. Informants were future-oriented and self-reliant (Granly, 1995).

Findings from these studies point at social support and network as being essential for this groups' adaptation in the country of exile. Avoidance like suppression and distraction seems to be important especially in relation to earlier memories and experiences. Also religion and religious beliefs were identified as contributing in the process of coping with hardship. While hoping and planning for the future only was found to be helping participants in one of the studies. These studies examined coping strategies in relation to processes of adaptation in host country or in dealing with traumatic experiences from the home country, but none of them studied coping strategies in relation to the specific difficulties of these processes.

### **Somalia as country of origin**

The two studies of Somali refugee youth discussed so far indicate that these adolescence do quite well in their host country (Halcon et al., 2004; Rousseau et al., 1998). This is in some sense surprising when considering information of their background in Somalia. Asylum seekers from Somalia in Norway have during the last years been coming from the biggest cities in Somalia, mostly from the area around Mogadishu. Their reason to seek asylum is in most of the cases the general security situation in these areas. After the civil war in Somalia in 1991 to 1992, these areas in the south and in the central parts of the country have had most armed conflicts (Landinfo, 2007). Unaccompanied refugee minors from Somalia have therefore in all probability experienced threatening situations in their home country before they left, and they are likely to worry about their families which are still staying in Somalia.

Somalis in Norway have been stigmatized by both officials and media as the worst case of refugees. This has led to a negative cycle where Somalis turn their backs on the Norwegian society, while Norwegian society turns its back on Somalis (Fangen, 2006). A debate in the Norwegian media of Somalis as a group has been experienced as stigmatizing to many. Debates of female circumcision, child robbers, use of hijab in school and unemployment have set the Somali population in general in a negative view (Engebrigtsen & Farstad, 2004). By stigmatized groups is meant; “social categories, about which others hold negative attitudes, stereotypes, and beliefs, or which, on average, receive disproportional poor interpersonal or economic outcomes relative to members of the society at large because of discrimination against members of the social category” (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 609).

The collectivistic and group-oriented Somali tradition they are coming from will also influence their lives in Norway (Lindner, 2000). Collectivistic societies like Somalia are based upon values as mutual dependence on relatives and sense of responsibility towards the collective (Arcel, 1988). These youths will often feel obliged to contribute to their families at home and to follow the expectations of their families, even if they live in Norway.

### **Objectives of the study**

An emerging field of psychological research is concerned with the coping processes of children and youths. Previous studies in ethnic minority groups have measured general coping styles or the ways in which people habitually cope with stress, and information on what kind of coping strategies that are used in real stress situations is needed.

Findings from previous studies on child refugee populations differ. Many refugee children seem to manage and cope well with the effects of their traumatic experiences, and a greater understanding of the adaptation process of unaccompanied minors’ may prove beneficial to clinicians and professionals working with this vulnerable group of young people, helping to maximize their potential for recovery and growth. Since appropriate coping strategies can be important elements in the prevention of mental health problems in youths, it is important to map out which coping strategies this group applies (Compas et al., 1993; Compas et al., 2001).

The purpose of the present study is to explore how unaccompanied minor refugee youths from Somalia cope with the process of adaptation in Norway. Specifically, the aim is to identify the difficulties these youths are facing in their everyday lives and the coping strategies applied in relation to these problems.

## **METHOD**

### **Subject pool**

Multi-Cultural Risk and Resilience Study (MCRRS) of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, division of mental health provided the data for this study. “Social network, coping and mental health among unaccompanied minor refugees in Norway” is a sub-project to the MCRRS study with the main goal of studying long term adaptation in this group of young immigrants. The sample frame included unaccompanied minor refugees from the four countries sending the largest number of unaccompanied minor refugees to Norway during the last six years; Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Sri Lanka (UDI, 2007). They were granted residence in the period from 2000 to 2006, and they were 16 years of age or younger at this time. This group constitutes 373 youths settled in 98 municipalities in 18 regions in Norway. The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) provided the necessary information about the informants.

The current sample includes unaccompanied minor refugees from ten municipalities that were assessed during the first four months of data collection. From the beginning of data collection it appeared that UDI provided incomplete information. About one third of the informants on the UDI-list were unknown by the local refugee officials. Several adolescents in the communities that fitted the project’s selection criteria were not on the list. When including these youths in the study we ended up with a sample of 175 youths. 29% of this sample participated in the study. Participants in the study came from Afghanistan (n = 11), Somalia (n = 24), Iraq (n = 1) and Sri Lanka (n = 14).

### **Sample frame**

In order to obtain a homogenous study group the sample was limited to boys aged 17 – 20 years from Somalia, who have resided in Norway for two years or more. Ten informants in



the sample fulfilled these criteria. Since the study aimed at exploring how unaccompanied minors cope with the process of adaptation in Norway, only youths that had resided in Norway for more than two years were included. Those who had stayed in the country for more than two years were believed to manage to view their own situation and adaptation process in perspective. Also, the researchers assumed that participants with longer residence in Norway would possess a higher fluency of Norwegian, thus conduct the interviews without translators.

Prior research has demonstrated gender variations in adaptation processes (Oppedal, Røysamb & Sam, 2004). More boys are coming as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers to Norway than girls, therefore fewer girls in the subject pool. During the last years boys consisted of between 70% and 85% of the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers coming to Norway (M. Hesselberg/UDI, personal communication, March 5, 2007). This thesis will give an in depth perspective on variation in boys' coping.

Somalis represent the largest group in the sample ( $n = 24$ ). Prior research among minority youths in Norway has shown that Somalis reported most experiences of discrimination, but the group with best mental health (Oppedal, Røysamb, & Heyerdahl, 2005). Therefore it would be highly interesting to study coping strategies within this group.

The study sample is homogenous in some respect. On the other hand, there is no information on their asylum process, why they applied for asylum and how they were traveling to Norway in the data material. Their backgrounds may therefore be quite different. The informants came to Norway when they were between 12 and 16 years old, and spent between one month and three years in reception centers for asylum seekers. They were then settled in six different municipalities in the eastern part of Norway where some lived in foster homes and others in their own apartment from approximately fifteen years old. The participants had stayed in Norway between two and seven years at the time of the study. One participant lived with his parents who came to Norway through family-reunionification programs, and one boy lived with relatives. The rest of the participants lived either in small group homes or by themselves in rented apartments. Although Norwegian was a new language for all participants, they all spoke Norwegian well.

**Table 1. Overview of informants**

	<b>Living arrange- ments</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Time spent in Norway</b>	<b>Time spent in reception center for asylum- seekers</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Contact with family in home country</b>	<b>Family in Norway</b>
Mahad	Familyreunion Living with mother and father	18	6 years	7-12 months	Student	Yes	Yes
Ali	Alone	20	7 years	7-12 months	Student	no info	No
Mohammed	Alone	20	5,5 years	13-18 months	Student	Yes	Yes
Abdi	Group-home *	18	5 years	7-12 months	Student	Yes	No
Said	Alone	20	5 years	0-6 months	Apprentice	Yes	Yes
Omar	Group-home *	19	5 years	7-12 months	Student	Yes	Yes
Yusuf	Group-home *	17	4 years	2-3 years	Student	Yes	Yes
Ahmed	Group-home *	18	2 years	7-12 months	Student	Yes	Yes
Abdiqadir	Alone	19	5 years	7-12 months	Working full time	No	No
Dahir	Living with family	17	2 years	7-12 months	Student	No	No

\* Living together with other youths under supervision by child welfare

### **Data collection**

Informants first completed a questionnaire, which they filled out while sitting in groups of three to eight youths. Then they were asked again to participate in an interview. After approving participation, the interviewer contacted the informants via phone. Most of the informants filled out the questionnaire one day and attended the interview another day. In these cases the time youths spent completing the questionnaire interviewer used to get to know them. To create a familiar atmosphere, participants were served pizza and soda. Data collections took place either in the locals of the social services, in the institutions where the youths lived or in another familiar setting. Informants could bring their guardians or their contact person in the child welfare to the data collection if they wanted.

The author and two research assistants conducted the interviews in Norwegian. The informants participated in one interview each and received a gift card worth approximately 16

USD. Each interview lasted between 30 and 76 minutes and was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Reviewing Medical Research on Humans and the Norwegian Data Inspectorate and is performed in accordance with their directions. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' confidentiality.

### **General concerns preparatory procedures**

Two major concerns were behind choice of procedures in the study. These were identified as keeping informants in the study for five years, and the vulnerability of the group and their possibly tiredness of being asked questions by The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), caretakers and researchers (Eide, 2000; Knudsen, 1991). Based on the list of informants provided by UDI, the social services in the different municipalities where the youths lived were contacted. Informants who were in contact with local refugee services were contacted through the refugee official. In other municipalities, a letter was sent out to the youth informing them about the project and inviting them to participate in the questionnaire and the interview. The letter was then followed by a phone call a week after the letter was sent out. When participants had got the information they needed, appointments about time and place were made. The day before the appointment they were called or received a text message on their mobile phones. Informants who were contacted directly from the project had a very low participation rate. All participants were asked if they wanted to use a translator during the interview and/or while filling out the questionnaire, all ten participants declined the translation service.

### **Measures**

The questionnaire covered information about the informants' background, their living arrangements in Norway, social relations and their mental health. Because this information was provided from the questionnaires there was no need to ask questions about their background during the interview. The aim of the interviews was to provide descriptions as precise and as close to the informants' subjective experience as possible, following a phenomenological, descriptive, and qualitative design with elements of grounded theory (see below).

The data was collected by means of the "Private Theory interview", a semi-structured, informant-centred and strategic conversation format developed from theories of tacit

knowledge (Polanyi, 1967). The role of the interviewer is to make it as easy as possible for the informant to formulate his or hers tacit knowledge. The interviewer makes it clear that he/she is genuinely interested in the interviewee's own experiences and interpretations, and asks for descriptions of subjective ideas and explanations (Ginner, Werbart, Levander & Sahlberg, 2001). The interview was developed at Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, in the section for psychotherapy, as part of the project "Private theories of pathogens and cure". The semi-structured interview was first used at psychiatric adult patients, before the YOUTH-version of the interview was developed. This version is focused at how youths see their problems in life, their possibilities to cope with them and handling them in the future (Winzer, 2003). The interviews provide information on the private theories or attributions adolescents have of the challenges and difficulties they experience in life. The theories include their thoughts of how these problems were formed and how they can handle them, both at the present time and in the future. The interview is used on youths in both Sweden (Jacobsson, 2005) and Norway. The study in Norway, where it was used in both ethnic Norwegian youths and minority youths, has not been published yet.

This interview form was chosen for this study for various reasons. Earlier research shows that information of coping often is general (Copeland & Hess, 1995; Vaughn & Scott, 2003). The present interview schedule is taking concrete experiences in the present time as a starting point. We wanted to focus at challenges in present time in order to avoid the youth's traumatic experiences from their home country. It was deemed irresponsible to let the youths open up for traumatic memories since we only met them once, and the interviewers were not trained clinicians. The interview only contains a few focused questions, designed to give useful and relevant information. Moreover, since the study focuses on how youth handle situations they experience as challenging to them, it was important that the interviewer did not make the participants feel uncomfortable during the interview, but rather could - to some extent - let them realize their strengths and coping abilities.

Each interview began with the following statement:

We all experience situations that are difficult and problematic from time to time. This interview is part of our study of how youths usually experience and handle different kinds of problems or difficulties.

What I first of all would like to know is what you think about the difficulties you have experienced, how you handled them, how they have influenced you, how it has been for you later, and how you think you will react next time something similar happens.

There is no correct answer, and it is you who decide what you will like to tell me. What I would like to grasp is your particular experiences and your understanding of these. Use your own words and tell it in your own way. If you have any questions or wonderings, you can just ask.

After reading this text about the purpose of the interview together with the informant and letting them ask questions, the informants were instructed by an open question “Can you tell me about something you find difficult nowadays?” If they didn’t come up with a problem at first, the interviewer told them that it could be either a small or a more extensive problem, and something they had experienced some time ago. None of the ten informants had difficulty with bringing up something that bothered them, except one person who claimed he didn’t have any problem, and started talking about something that happened some years ago. Later in the interview it turned out he had a problem at the present moment which he told the interviewer.

From there, the interviewer improvised on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide and structured the path of the conversation through responses to the issues brought up by the interviewee<sup>1</sup>. To facilitate the interviewee’s thoughts and reflections of their themes, the interviewer responded mainly by means of open instructions (“Tell me more....”) and questions (“What do you think about this?”), repeating the informant’s own formulations and by verbal (“I understand”) and nonverbal (nodding) facilitators. It is also important that the informant knows that the questions first and foremost aim to generate information important to understand his subjective world. The interviewer will aim for doing it as easy as possible for the informant to formulate the “tacit” knowledge.

The three interviewers went through thorough training in the interview before they conducted the interviews. The research assistants were all Norwegian girls between 25 and 28 years of age. The author has been working with unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and refugees

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix A for the whole interview guide.

through five years before attending this research project. Experiences and knowledge from this work will have influenced the process of analysis.

### **Data analysis**

The author transcribed the interviews verbatim, and the transcriptions were checked for accuracy by a fellow student who heard random examples from each interview. This was done to ensure correct transcriptions. Text analyses were conducted using the software program QSR-N\*Vivo. The transcriptions were first divided into the two categories ‘descriptions of difficulties’ and ‘descriptions of coping’. Text excerpts which fitted into both categories placed in both categories. These two categories covered a majority of the statements from the interviews. After repeatedly reading and listening to each interview, each text was explored by means of open thematic coding according to the “bottom up” principle (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The text was coded and categorized in a process of deconstruction. By coding and categorizing means to divide the text (coding) into text excerpts according to the content of their meaning (statements), which each communicate one or more experiences (knowledge), and to give them one or more names (category). Each statement was read, interpreted for meaning and placed in a category. This was done without taking research question and theoretical assumptions into consideration. The reason for this was to let the empirical material lay the ground for the categories. Each category was then properly defined to ensure reliability. For example, the text excerpt *“I have used too much money. I have learnt a lot from it. I will try to remember it next time, and I won’t do it like this. So as I always say, if you do a mistake one time, you will learn something from it. So it is sometimes good to make mistakes”* could be coded under the phenomenon “learn of ones own mistakes”; sorted under the higher-order potential construct “positive thinking”, which again is sorted under “cognitive restructuring” which was placed under the main area “coping”.

Each empirically generated potential construct at each level in the tree was defined with reference to the essences of all original text excerpts. “Backward translation” was used to see whether the generated constructs fit the text and to detect possible overlaps between constructs and needs for adjustments or supplements.

The author has been mainly responsible for the analysis, but has in dialogue with the supervisor interpreted statements and made categorizations to ensure agreement upon the categories. The meaning of each statement was interpreted within the context of the interview

and situation, not on face value of the statements. When all interviews were coded, the categories that weren't relevant for the research question were disregarded. The result of further systematizing of the categories was three levels: theme, under-theme, and phenomenon. The under-themes covered in total 94 phenomena including 32 described difficulties, and 62 described coping strategies. The three difficulties "economy", "discrimination" and "missing family" were chosen for further analysis. The interviews were then read through again to find descriptions of coping strategies used in relation to the difficulties "economy", "discrimination" and "missing family".

## RESULTS

Informants described difficulties they faced at the time of the interview, or experienced recently. Informants explained how the difficulties influenced them in their daily lives and how they deal with the problems. To see how the coping strategies related to their problems it is necessary to take a closer look at what kind of difficulties these youths face in their lives.

### Phenomena described as difficulties

Most of the difficulties could be grouped in the three categories or constructs; 'economy' (n = 5), 'discrimination' (n = 5) and 'longing for family' (n = 5). One or more of these difficulties were reported in each of the ten interviews. They were selected for further analysis because of the high frequency among the difficulties mentioned. Apart from these categories problems were only presented by one or two persons. Table 2 shows an overview of the constructs.

**Table 2. Overview of reported difficulties**

	Discrimination	Economy	Longing for family
Mahad	X		
Ali	X	X	
Mohammed	X	X	X
Abdi	X		
Said	X	X	
Omar			X
Yusuf			X
Ahmed			X
Abdiqadir		X	X
Dahir		X	
Total	5	5	5

The difficulties informants brought up during the interviews are based on self-reports. The difficulties therefore refer to subjective experiences. The phenomena are mainly consequences of the problems. These are listed up below each difficulty<sup>2</sup>. Except from the three constructs of ‘discrimination’, ‘economy’ and ‘longing for family’ problems in relation to school, moving, love life and illness were brought up<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Discrimination*** (n = 5)

The discrimination construct includes descriptions of experiences where informants perceive to be treated differently or badly because of their look and their background. They report that employers are critical to them as Somalis and experience difficulties in getting a job. Others report people stare at them when they pass them by car, exclude them from the sports team or repeatedly mistake them for drug-dealers on the street. Some of the informants find it difficult to find Norwegian friends.

**Table 3. Discrimination phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	
Stressors	Discrimination	Hard to get a job	3
		Treated different	4
		Feel uncomfortable in lines in front of passport check	2
		Racial harassment from Norwegian foster father	1
		Difficult to get to know Norwegians	3
		Excluded from sports team	1
		Difficult to learn Norwegian because Norwegians don’t understand	1

The label of discrimination was set by the author. None of the informants used the term ‘discrimination’ themselves, but one boy acknowledged discrimination when the interviewer confronted him. They only indirectly described these situations as discrimination. It seemed like the youths didn’t want to call this kind of behaviour discrimination or talk about discrimination directly. But it seems like most of the informants perceive or are aware of being member of a stigmatized group in Norway as indicated by the following statements by Ali and Mahad:

*Ali: But there are many who, it is difficult really to get a job because you’re maybe a little different than others. It can be like that, you know? Because you, yes, they don’t know you so well you know. I mean employers and stuff. (...) Maybe they don’t know what you can do. They may have the wrong impression of you, you know.*

<sup>2</sup> Definitions of these difficulties can be found in appendix B.

<sup>3</sup> These problems can be found in appendix B.



Mahad: *I'm worried about my future career. If it will be a problem with my background. (...) I don't know how the situation will be, but I'm thinking, what's the point of making it important where you're coming from? If they're almost not seeing you as a person then... Somalis have a bad reputation.*

Moreover, most of the informants seem in a way surprised by the discrimination they face because they find their own background irrelevant in relation to e.g. employers. Some of them worry about their future because of the difficulty to get a job. One of the reasons for this may be that they perceive the reactions here labelled as discrimination as controlled totally by external factors. The construct of discrimination is in this way separated from the construct of economy and longing for family, because the last-mentioned depends more on internal factors.

The descriptions of discrimination are characterized by a kind of soreness. It is little aggression to find in their descriptions. This, by the way, is in line with several psychological theories that predict members of stigmatized groups to have low global self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Mohammed: *But I hoped that things would, that people would accept me and not look at me as an immigrant. The two first years you can call me an immigrant, but when I speak Norwegian and are integrated, then I have to be accepted as Norwegian. (...) They treat me on the basis of my appearance. And you should never do that. You have to see what's inside. That's when you get to know people.*

### ***Economy*** (n = 5)

The construct of problems with economy refers to informants' reports of being in lack of money. They experience that it is hard to make a living with their money, and it seems clear that they worry and think a lot about this. For some this problem is present because they can't get a job;

Ali: *To find a job and survive sort of. (...) I'm having scholarship from Lånekassen (the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund) to survive. But now I don't receive the scholarship anymore. So I have to make living from a job."*

For others this problem is partly a consequence of them sending money to their families in Somalia;

Mohammed: *And I'm sending money to them (his family), and that's what's making me really poor in a way. I'm ending up in a situation almost without any money. But that's what happens.*

**Table 4. Economy phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	
Stressors	Economy	Citizenship is expensive	1
		Difficult to survive	3
		Quitting sport	1
		Sending money home	4
		Borrowed money	1
		Getting ill of thoughts	1
		Difficult to socialize with Norwegian youths because they spend a lot of money	1
		Cannot afford right medical treatment	1

The consequences of poor economy are numerous. One informant reports that he had to stop doing sports because he couldn't afford to be a member of the club anymore. Dahir says that he is getting ill from thinking of his lack of money;

*Sometimes if I haven't got money, it's almost like I'm ill. Almost ill because I'm getting weak, and I don't need to talk to anybody in school or elsewhere. So I can get angry at other people even if they aren't doing anything wrong to me.*

Dahir further explains that he cannot afford to spend time with Norwegian youth because they do activities too expensive for him;

*First and foremost you think of money that if I had money I could have spent time with them (the Norwegian boys). Because I don't have money I have to go away sometimes. So that's... (quiet). Many times we choose to stay with foreigners than Norwegian boys. Because they have money and can do what they want, while we have little money and have to set a budget.*

It seems like their economic problems affect their everyday life extensively. Research has found a relationship between poor economy and depression in the group of unaccompanied minor refugees in Norway (Oppedal, 2007). The responsibility and commitment of sending money to their families in Somalia cannot serve as the only explanation for their economical problems. Of the four informants reporting that they send money home to their families in their home country, only two complain of poor economy. The two other informants who send money home do not report economical problems. The reason for this is probably that these two boys still are under daily care of the child welfare and therefore have an acceptable economy. A part of the problem for those not being under care of the child welfare, turns out to be that they experience a setback in their economy compared to previous years and the time they were under daily care of the child welfare. Ali explains;

*Then (when he was under care of child welfare) I could buy clothes and I could do things. I had economy good enough to survive. But after that it is less and less.*

***Less and less now?***

*Yes, it is back to the time I spent in the reception centre (for asylum seekers) in a way. It is going back in time. (...) It is going from very bad, to better and then bad again. So we will see.*

Poor economy turns out to be a problem also for those who do not send money home. The boy who report social exclusion because of poor economy does not send money home. It does not seem that participants who want to send remittance home cannot do so. Two informants have contact with family in their home country and do not report that they send money. These two do not complain of poor economy or bring economy up as a problem during the interview. It seems clear that problems of poor economy are complex and that the consequences are varied.

***Longing for family*** (n = 5)

The longing for family construct includes two dimensions. The first dimension includes informants who keep missing family members in Somalia and express that they feel lonely, and the second includes informants worried about the well-being of family members in Somalia and their situation. Longing for family is the most dominating dimension of this construct.

**Table 5. Longing for family phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	
Stressors	Longing for family	Missing	2
		Lack of concentration	2
		Worries	3
		Afraid of being too Norwegian	1
		Refusal of family reunion	2
		Family member disappeared	1
		Loneliness	2

Some of the informants applied for family reunion to reduce these feelings, but the applications have been declined. The informants have various ways of keeping contact with family members. Some of them talk on the phone or send e-mails, while others have no contact at all. Those who stay in contact with their families seem to worry for them, Yusuf explains;

*(...) they are not okay down there. I cannot say that they are okay. When I talk to them on the phone, it doesn't sound like they are okay there.*

Informants describe how these thoughts give them problems with concentration at school. Mohammed explains;

*The most difficult thing for me right now is that I have a family in Africa. (..) I care a lot for them all the time. Day and night. And sometimes I have problems with my concentration because I'm thinking of them.*

The aspect of longing for and missing family members to a large extent is obvious in Abdiqadir's description;

*It influences my everyday life very much. When I'm thinking of my family when I do something good, I think that they are proud of what I'm doing. When I do something bad it would have been good if they were here and could have given me some advices. That's how I think. So it influences my everyday life a lot.*

Reports like this are in line with results from the Multi-Cultural Risk and Resilience Study (MCRRS) in unaccompanied minor refugees that indicate worries about family members abroad are a likely risk factor of mental health problems (Oppedal, 2007). Also a study of Sudanese refugees showed that one of the most common post-migration difficulties was concerns about family members not living in the new country of resettlement, and this was found to be associated with increased depression, anxiety and somatisation (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the difficulties covered by the construct of longing for family, poses an extensive challenge to be coped with for these youths.

A summary of the findings from the phenomena described as difficulties in the interviews show that the problems these youths brought up during the interviews generally relate to their situation as refugees or immigrants in Norway. One informant talked about problems in relation to his girlfriend, except from this were all problems mentioned in some way or another connected to their situation as refugees. It is not known if this is because informants were invited to the interview as unaccompanied refugees. Possibly the informants thought it was expected of them to talk about refugee related difficulties in the interviews or that their problems actually relate to their refugee status. In any case the three of difficulties; discrimination, economy and longing for family, are all challenging problems which to different degrees can influence these youths' mental health, depending on how they cope with the challenges.

### Phenomena described as coping strategies

Analysis and categorization of text excerpts coded as “coping”, resulted in six constructs representing coping strategies that informants employed to deal with their problems<sup>4</sup>. The constructs include 62 phenomena, as illustrated with excerpts from interviews (see below). These phenomena are listed up below each construct of coping strategies<sup>5</sup>. Table 6 shows the distribution of each category of coping. The construct of support are taken into use by all ten informants, while the construct of avoidance only is used by five informants. Informants apply from all six constructs (n = 3) of coping, to only three coping strategies (n = 1).

**Table 6. Overview of constructs of coping strategies**

	Support	Cognitive restructuring	Handling problems alone	Avoidance	Distraction	Actively solving the problem
Mahad	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ali	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mohammed	X	X	X	X	X	X
Abdi	X		X	X	X	X
Said	X	X	X	X		
Omar	X	X	X		X	
Yusuf	X	X				X
Ahmed	X	X	X		X	X
Abdiqadir	X	X	X			X
Dahir	X	X			X	X
Total	10	9	8	5	7	8

#### **Support** (n = 10)

The construct of support involves coping efforts to elicit emotional or concrete support from others. Seeking social support is usually sorted under the category of emotion-focused coping or engagement-focused coping. Seeking social support is labelled engagement-focused coping because the person needs to take action to get the support, and emotional-focused coping because the support a person gets make her or him express emotions and to relief feelings (Compas et al, 2001). Informants seek support from both persons of the same age and adults. Persons of the same age are mostly friends, while adults can be both parents, other family members, teachers and other officials. The support they seek cover emotional support, information and direct help.

<sup>4</sup> For details of the coding procedure see method section p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Definitions of the phenomena of coping strategies can be found in appendix B

**Table 7. Support phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	N
Support	Talking	Talking to friends	5
		Talking to family in Norway	4
		Talking to adults in Norway	3
		Talking to guardian	1
		Talking to school nurse	1
		Talking to family in home country	2
		Talking to teacher	1
		Talking to colleagues	1
		Talking to officials (social welfare office 1 and child welfare 3)	4
	Concret help	Help from friends	3
		Support from Somali youth organization	1

Informants sought support from friends, family in Norway and in Somalia, and adults which could include a teacher, their guardian or other officials. When it comes to friends, they receive support both by talking, spending time with friends and by receiving concrete help. The support is clearly important to them, Ali explains;

*You have to have good friends. That's important. I have good friends, so. If I didn't have good friends I don't know if I would have survived.*

It differs a lot how open they seem to be with their friends. One informant says that he can only talk to friends in the same situation as him, namely unaccompanied refugees, because they understand him well. Another informant says that he cannot talk to his friends in the same situation as him, because they don't talk about such things as family. Informants mention friends who lend each other money and help each other to get a job.

Informants are seeking support from adults by discussing their difficulties with them, asking for advices of what to do and asking for more money. When it comes to parents and family, some informants report that they call them when they miss their family.

It differs to which extent they utilize their possibilities for social support. One informant reports that he is talking to friends and family in both Norway, and Somalia, his friends' parents and child welfare when he has problems, while others want to keep personal things to themselves. Some of them explain that they like to keep their problems private, but they can talk to e.g. friends about positive matters. This wish of keeping personal things to themselves can have a connection to the collective society in which they grew up. Mahad explains it in this way:

*(...) I don't like to share with others. So if it doesn't help, it will just be like that. Just like that. My limit is not to share with others about how I am in my daily life. I mean that I don't like to tell people how I am. It is okay to tell of the positive part, but the negative part I work on if it's possible.*

The relationship between life stressors, social support and mental health is shown by numerous studies and social support is found to protect persons from potentially adverse effects of stressful events (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The importance of support seems clear also in this study and necessary for the mental health of this group of young people. The effects are very positive. Some informants describe a need for "letting things out", because they feel uncomfortable inside, in their heart, in their stomach or head if they don't talk to anybody about their problem. These symptoms are typically psycho-somatic symptoms of depression. Omar and Said explains;

*Omar: In the beginning when I came, I didn't want to talk to someone. But what I kept inside myself made big problems. It got worse and worse. So then I thought, I had to let out what I kept inside and talk to people. (...) If you keep things inside, it hurts in there, but if you let it out and share it with somebody it feels better.*

Said:

***Does it help to talk to someone?***

*Yes.*

***Why?***

*Because if you have something inside your heart. It will get worse and worse. But if you tell somebody, the hurt disappears.*

They are also open on how much this support mean to them, and that they need advices from adults. Some informants experience that they lack this kind of support, Ahmed report;

***Do you wish there was someone you could talk to about it?***

*Yes... Because, it helps a bit. When you talk about the things you have inside your stomach, you don't need to think of it. Otherwise it comes again and you think of it again and again.*

Mohammed who gets this support explains how much it means to him;

***Do you talk to somebody?***

*Yes, I have two contacts which I appreciate very much. I thank god that I got to know them. I call them a couple of times each month and get some advices or what can I say...*

***Advices or?***

*Yes, they guide me in a way. For each new day I have to learn rules and laws in this country. Each day I have to learn something new, so to say. So I call them and ask about it, because they have been living in Norway and know a lot.*

Social support and network often operate as buffers for trauma and suffering (Garmezy, 1983). This coping strategy has been found as being important for this groups' adaptation in the country of exile in previous studies (Goodman, 2004; Granly, 1995; Sutton et al., 2006; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005).

### ***Cognitive restructuring*** (n = 9)

The construct of cognitive restructuring involves coping responses to adapt to the difficulties by trying to reduce the problem, using explanations, thinking positive about the problems they face and having dreams about the future. These cognitive ways of reframing are used to adapt to the situation, similarly with the strategy of seeking support. This coping strategy is referred to as secondary control coping, which is coping aimed at maximizing one's fit to the current conditions (Compas et al, 2001).

**Table 8. Cognitive restructuring phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	N
Cognitive restructuring	Reducing problems	Used to it	4
		Otherwise it's good	5
		It's not just me	1
		It was worse in Somalia	3
	Positive thinking	Thinking positively	4
		Proud of who I am	2
		Thankful	2
		Hoping things get better	5
		Learn of ones mistakes	1
		It will be ok when I get older	1
		Dreams about the future	3
	Future oriented	Help others in the future	2
		High education as a goal	1
	Explanations	Can get help if I need it	1
		They are just jealous	1
		Explaining discrimination with culture and fear	1
		I can't do anything about it	1

Informants try to reduce their problems by claiming that “otherwise are things are okay”, “I’m used to it”, “it was worse in Somalia” and “it’s not only me”. Ali and Mohammed explains;  
 Ali: *It is many who have it like this, you know. So I know many who are in this situation. Many friends of mine who are like this. (...) It's not just me who has a hard time.*

Mohammed: *This is nothing compared to what I experienced in Somalia as a child. In a way it is a compliment that I meet people who are only mean psychologically and not physically. They aren't coming with a Kalashnikov against me.*



Positive thinking are used in ways of being thankful for the possibilities they possess in Norway in accordance to education and work, hoping things will get better with time and personal pride, like Mohammed;

*I'm grateful that I could stay in Norway. In a way it's like winning in a lottery. I can go to school. I can work when I want, I can. Yes, I can accomplish what I want.*

Being future oriented by having goals or dreams, e.g. dreams of helping others, are also used as coping strategies. Both hoping things get better and having dreams about the future are important coping strategies. Hoping and planning for the future was also identified as coping strategies in other qualitative studies of coping in unaccompanied refugee minors (Goodman, 2004; Granly, 1995). Mohammed in the present study has clear goals for his future;

*I want to help others who suffer. And I want to be an ideal to youth who have experienced as much as or more pain and suffering than me. That's what I want. That's what I want to work for. Everybody has a task in this world, and mine is to contribute the best I can.*

Informants use explanations in ways of attribute discrimination to fear and culture differences, and to people being jealous. Research has documented the tendency of individuals to engage in behaviours that can protect the self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989). The explanations used by informants in this study confirm those findings in that informants attribute negative feedback to prejudice against their group (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Said: *No, before I thought that Norwegians were racists or something, but now I believe that it has something to do with culture.*

***With culture, how?***

*I don't know. Or, they think foreigners are dangerous because they come from different countries with war and stuff. Lots of different things.*

***You think they think that you are dangerous because you come from countries with war?***

*Yes, that's true. We have experienced many different things. War and killings and fucking shit. Many are shit and many are good. And yourself. Norwegians have some who are good and some who are bad.*

It seems clear that these strategies of cognitive restructuring give positive results for the individuals using them in ways of e.g. protecting them against discriminative behaviour (Crocker & Major, 1989) and giving them hope and dreams for the future.

***Handle problems alone* (n = 8)**

The construct of handling problems alone include descriptions of efforts to deal with problems on ones own. Informants think that they will succeed with reaching their goals if

they fight and struggle hard enough, while some claim they are self-reliant, and others that they just do nothing else than stand the situation. All informants seek support in one way or another, but informants also report that they keep personal things to themselves.

**Table 9. Handle problems alone phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	N
Handling problems alone	Taking responsibility for oneself	Fighting/struggling	3
		Self-reliance	4
		Never give up	1
		Keeping personal things to oneself	3
		Doing nothing	2

It seems like these youths during their flight to Norway and their first phase in Norway are getting so used to be on their own, that they cannot see other alternatives than to fight and struggle to deal with their problems one their own. Like Ali describes it:

*Since I came to Norway I have tried the best I can, because there are no others who can do it for me. I have to fight for myself. And I have to find food for myself in a way. (...) You have to have a job and be self-reliant. Everything, nobody is doing anything for you, you know? You have to rely on yourself all the time. I have been doing it for a long time. I have. I came to Norway alone, you know. I managed.*

On one hand, the informants report that they are doing fine on their own, and on the other some informants mention that they miss social support from persons they trust. Some of them miss a confident, while others want to keep problems to themselves. Abdiqadir explain:

*I am really an open person that likes to talk about everything. But when it comes to family, I like to keep it for myself. (...) But the most difficult problems which I find very hard to talk about, I keep to me. Then I can find out what I can do later. (...) The only problem can be for example my family, which I actually don't like to talk about. I find it a bit sad to talk about them. So I keep it to myself. Then I don't go out and talk to friends about it.*

**Why don't you?**

*Well, it could be... I really do have very good friends. But sometimes I think that it can be they won't understand how the situation is. And then they can react in another way than it really is.*

The strategy of handling problems on ones own seems to be a more negative way of tackling difficulties. This seems clear because the informants report that they actually wish to share their thoughts with someone. Their reasons for keeping things to themselves may be negative experiences from talking to others about their problems earlier. It seems like they handle things on their own because they experience that no one can help them, instead of actually wanting to deal with their problems by themselves.

**Avoidance** (n = 5)

The avoidance-construct includes efforts to avoid or disengage from the stressor or one's emotions (Compas et al., 2001).

**Table 10. Avoidance phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	N
Avoidance	Avoiding the stressor	Forgetting	5
		Suppression	1
		Stop speaking Norwegian	1
		Being calm	2

The interviews indicate that some informants forget about their problems (n=5) and in other ways try to avoid the source of the stress. Like Abdi reports;

*I went to my room and forgot about it.*

Said told that he quitted speaking Norwegian because he repeatedly experienced that nobody understood him:

*I cannot speak Norwegian. Forget it. After that, I tried to speak Norwegian many places, but they said "no, we don't understand what you're saying". (...) So then I said, I have to quit speaking Norwegian. So I began to speak one of the other languages. My mother-tongue or English.*

The strategy seems to involve self instruction to some extent. Informants tell themselves e.g. not to think of the problem, forget or be calm. This type of behaviour and way of cope with difficulties is viewed as a quite negative strategy (Compas et al., 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2004).

**Distraction** (n = 7)

The construct of distraction involves coping efforts aimed at distraction through positive thoughts or activities (Compas et al., 2001). Informants distract themselves from thinking of the problems and worries by involvement with an activity they enjoy and that makes them feel good.

**Table 11. Distraction phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	N
Distraction	Using activities for suppression	Physical exercise	2
		Music	2
		Seeing friends	2
		Play-station	1
		Fresh air	2
		Work	1
		Schoolwork	2
		Physical exercise	1
	Using activities for ventilation		

Informants report that they try to fill up their time with different kinds of activities so they don't get time for worrying. These activities can be physical exercise, listening to music, seeing friends, going for a walk, work and do homework from school. Mahad plays football; *If I'm thinking a lot of something I use to do the things I like the most, and that's playing football. Then I forget about the situation which it has been today.*

And Omar prefer exercising and meeting friends;

***What do you do to handle the things you find difficult?***

*I don't know.. I go out to see friends. I make myself busy with for example working out, so that I can't sit down and think you know. Trying to do a lot of stuff in stead of just sitting down and say this won't work out. I use to take fresh air and meet friends to make the time with thinking pass away. I move on with my life then.*

These strategies of distraction help the informants not to think too much of their problems, and they report being happy for their possibilities for distraction from their difficulties. It is interesting to see how conscious they are of the distraction as an important coping strategy for themselves. They explain clearly how they fill up their time to make themselves busy and planning activities to escape the thoughts they find hard to deal with. Further, they report how the distraction is healthy for them.

Prior research in unaccompanied refugee minors (Sutton et al., 2006; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005; Goodman, 2004) has identified distraction through positive activities. Findings are the same for the present study and prior research, in that activities are positive in the process of coping. Activities contribute both through distracting youths from distressing memories and by being an outlet for managing strong affective states.

### ***Active problem solving*** (n = 8)

The construct of strategies used to active problem solving are efforts to do something with the concrete problems instead of adjusting oneself or ones emotions to the problems. Active coping efforts or primary control coping, are intended to achieve some degree of personal control over the stressful aspects of the environments and one's emotions (Compas et al., 2001).

**Table 12. Active problem solving phenomena**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	N
Active problem solving	Doing something to change the situation	Seeking family reunion	3
		Trace family in Somalia	1
		Visit family in Africa	3
		Send money	3
		Use little money	2
		Working hard with schoolwork	3
		Working hard to earn money	1
		Seeking actively for a job	2
		Try to get in contact with Norwegians	1
		Adapt and integrate	1
		Try to move to another class	1
		Go early to bed	1
		Change religion	1
		Quit school	1
		Playing on gambling machine	1
		Spending time with minority youths	1

Informants disclose how they tried to solve problems of economy, the longing for family, getting a job, working hard at school and trying to get in contact with Norwegians and adapt to the Norwegian society. Mahad who was worried that he wouldn't get a job because of his background said:

*I put a lot of effort into school. I have to get a good education. (...) To get into the college I need courses and stuff, math course, science and physics. So I'm planning to take it while I'm an apprentice. (...) I take the courses for two years when I'm an apprentice. Then I educate further.*

Informants feel a huge responsibility for their families which they left behind in their home country and informants report how they try to do what they can to help them:

*Yusuf: I heard that if you work a lot or earn a lot of money, so that you can take care of the family, like, if I for example earn almost 4000 USD or something per month. Then I can take care of them you know, because then I can rent a house and pay the money for food and stuff. Then I may get them to the country.*

Ahmed:

***What did you do then when the situation*** (worried for family because of war in Mogadishu where his family is living) ***was difficult?***

*I couldn't really do anything, I just had to help them with the economy, send money and stuff. There was nothing else I could do.*

***Do you send them money?***

*Yes, just so they have something to the daily life. It's nothing more than that.*

From the interviews it seems important for the informants to be able to do something about their problems. They are very focused and active in doing what they can in relation to the problems they possess the resources to do something about.

To summarize: The coping strategies the informants in this study are taken into use shows that they are tackling the challenges they face in many different ways. Each informant uses between two and six coping strategies to confront their problems. Even if both passive and active coping strategies are found, these youths seem active and very involved in creating their situations as good as possible. To get more information of the relation between coping strategies and type of difficulty we now look more deeply into which strategies which are used across different situations.

### **Coping strategies in relation to difficulty**

The informants who brought up one or more of the three difficulties ‘economy’, ‘discrimination’ and ‘longing for family’ as their main problems during the interviews and talked about how they coped with these stressors, are looked at here. Table 13 shows which coping strategies the informants applied for each of the problems.

**Table 13. Overview of difficulties and applied coping strategies**

	<b>Economy (n = 5)</b>	<b>Longing for family (n = 5)</b>	<b>Discrimination (n = 4)</b>
<b>Mahad</b>			All 6 constructs of coping represented
<b>Ali</b>	All 6 constructs of coping represented		
<b>Mohammed</b>	Support Distraction Cognitive restructuring Active problem solving Avoidance	Support Cognitive restructuring Handling problems alone Active problem solving	Cognitive restructuring Handling problems alone
<b>Abdi</b>			Support Avoidance Distraction
<b>Said</b>	Support Handling problems alone Active problem solving		Support Cognitive restructuring Avoidance Distraction Active problem solving Being calm
<b>Omar</b>		Support Cognitive restructuring Handling problems alone Distraction Active problem solving	
<b>Yusuf</b>		Support Cognitive restructuring Active problem solving	
<b>Ahmed</b>		Support Cognitive restructuring Handling problems alone Distraction Active problem solving	
<b>Abdiqadir</b>	Support Cognitive restructuring Active problem solving	Cognitive restructuring Handling problems alone Active problem solving	
<b>Dahir</b>	Support Distraction Active problem solving		

As table 13 shows were the strategy of seeking support and active problem solving applied by all informants who faced problems with poor economy. In relation to the problem of longing for family, all informants apply the strategies of cognitive restructuring and active problem solving. The construct of avoidance coping was applied more in relation to problems of discrimination, than in relation to the other problems. The findings show how these youths choose appropriate coping strategies to deal with their problems.

The relation between type of problem and coping strategy chosen is not very clear. All constructs of coping are applied at both the problem of discrimination and economy. In relation to longing for family are all constructs of coping except from the construct of avoidance used. The construct of distraction is neither used to a large extent in relation to the problem of longing. These youths seem therefore to deal with their situation as separated from their families rather than trying to suppress these thoughts.

In relation to the construct of problems with economy are all informants applying the strategy of seeking support and active problem solving. Internal locus of control in the youths seems high in relation to economical problems, and they are able to try to do something about the problem themselves. That they seek support for this problem may be surprising, but can be explained in that support is both emotional support and practical or concrete help. Informants report that they seek advice on what to do in relation to economical problems and lend money from friends. They do also find support in just discussing with friends and others about these problems.

In relation to the construct of problems with longing for family are all informants applying the strategies of cognitive restructuring and active problem solving. Both of these strategies seem appropriate. As possibly anticipated, the strategy of seeking support would be important in relation to the problem of longing. Three informants report that they do cope with the problem of longing by reminiscing with others about their family and Somalia. But some informants say they like to keep personal problems (like longing for family) to themselves. As many as four out of five informants report that they want to handle the problem of longing for family alone. (Only one informant reports using the strategy of handling problems alone in relation to problems of poor economy and discrimination.) Informants report directly that the reason for this is that they fear that they will encounter people who will not relate or understand them and their situation, if they open up about their difficulties.

When it comes to the construct of problems with discrimination, none of the coping strategies are applied by all informants, but the strategies of cognitive restructuring, distraction, avoidance and support are used the most. Expectedly, this is the problem where the constructs of avoidance and distraction are used the most. Informants find experiences of discrimination humiliating and want to forget, suppress and distract from it. It appears that this coping strategy is appropriate for the informants in this study. Possibly this is a constructive strategy



when it is used in relation to problems which the informants do not have control over. According to Ajzen is choice of coping strategy connected to perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 2002). Markstrom et al. (2000) found that strategies of avoidance can be suitable for certain types of situations, e.g. irresolvable problems. Informants do also cope with the problem of discrimination by talking to others (support), by positive thoughts as being proud of whom they are and explanations like “they are afraid” or “they are just jealous” (Cognitive restructuring).

The construct of active problem solving are used by all informants both at the problems with economy and problems with longing for family, but only by two informants in relation to the construct of discrimination. It seems therefore clear that it differs from problem to problem to what extent these youths experience internal and external locus of control. Discrimination may be experienced as a problem unaccompanied minors cannot do so much about, while both economy and longing are difficulties they try to handle themselves.

Findings of the relation between coping strategies and problems indicate that the problems of economy and longing for family may bring forth the most positive coping strategies, while the more negative strategies of avoidance and distraction are applied at the construct of discrimination. Informants apply many strategies and seem to take into use the most appropriate strategy for each problem they face.

## **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

The study explored how unaccompanied refugee minors cope with the process of adaptation in Norway; a process entailing several challenges. The first aim of the study was to identify if unaccompanied refugee minors experience difficulties in their everyday lives in Norway, and which problems these may be. Secondly, examine the coping strategies they apply in relation to these problems. Interview data show that these youths strive with problems of poor economy, longing for their families in Somalia and discriminating treatment from others. Further, the findings show that they apply a wide spectre of coping strategies and cope with problems in different ways. The informants seem to choose appropriate coping strategies to fit each specific difficulty they face.

Theory of acculturation (e.g. Berry, 1991) seem to presume that the adaptation is a stressful and difficult process. The situation for refugees, and especially unaccompanied refugee minors is therefore believed to be burdening. This group of youths has formerly not been studied broadly, however some research reports indicate that many unaccompanied minors function quite well in their new society in the meaning of having an education and a job (Eide, 2000; Engebrigtsen, 2002; Geltman et al., 2005; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Rousseau et al., 1998; van Wijk-Zielstra 2001 & Snijders, 1995 cited in Wold, 2002; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005). Does this mean that acculturation theory has overstated the challenges for this group? Or are these youths struggling with great challenges and difficulties, but as far as possible coping with them?

Previous studies in Norway have to a large extent focused on the first period of unaccompanied minors in the country, i.e. the asylum seeking period, and to a less extent on the adaptation and well-being of those who are granted residency. Little is therefore known about resettled refugee youths and the difficulties they face in this settlement phase in Norway, and even less is known concerning the way they handle these challenges. Samples of studies of coping in children and youths are limited in regards to ethnic- and socioeconomic diversity (Compas et al., 2001). Most of the studies concern ethnic diversity failed to address the varieties of coping strategies in relation to the specific stressor at hand (Compas et al., 1988). In addition, the studies that have investigated situation-specific coping is mainly limited to the ways youths cope with hypothetical stressors, hence these studies may not provide a realistic picture of coping in relation to real life stressors. Only a few qualitative studies have examined coping in unaccompanied minor refugees (Goodman, 2004; Granly, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Sutton et al., 2006; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005). The studies performed have examined coping in relation to earlier trauma or with adaptation in general in the country of exile. None of them have aimed to look at coping with specific situations.

The present study used a qualitative approach with interviews to explore the coping strategies unaccompanied refugee minors apply in dealing with everyday problems. An open and explorative approach was appropriate to get answers to the research questions above. Interviews are appropriate to provide a richer understanding of coping responses, different combinations of coping responses and the application of coping responses in relation to different problems (Compas et al., 2001). The reason for analyzing the results in a phenomenological way with elements of grounded theory was to gain information of not just

how these youths think, but how they act in relation to their difficulties. Other ways of analyzing the findings, e.g. through discourse analysis, may provide more information of how these youths think about their coping tactics and the ways they present themselves, and less information of how they actually behave (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004). Previous studies of coping unaccompanied refugee minors which have applied narrative or discourse analysis have gained different type of knowledge of coping than the present study (Goodman, 2004; Granly, 1995).

### **Difficulties experienced in the process of adaptation**

The three constructs which could be extracted from the difficulties the youths reported were ‘discrimination’, ‘poor economy’, and ‘longing for family’. Findings from the present study indicate that these problems likely may influence the mental health of these youths. Prior research among unaccompanied refugee minors confirms poor economy and longing for family as risk factors of mental health problems (Oppedal, 2007). Findings do also give emphasis to the importance of helping young people to access a wide range of supportive networks that can provide unaccompanied refugee minors with the support and comfort they may need. Poor economy may lead to social exclusion, and lack of social support in situations of longing for family may give psychosomatic symptoms.

The problems brought up by the informants are to different degree related to their situation as refugees. Whether this is because they felt an expectation to talk about these kinds of difficulties in the study or whether these are the problems which are prominent to the life of the informants is not clear. While youths typically experience a phase of general identity development, searching in various areas as occupation, religion and political orientation (Eriksson, 1968), unaccompanied refugee youth in the present study deals with the problems mentioned above in addition to exploring the meaning of their ethnicity (Phinney, 1990). Other young people in this phase are usually concerned about their future, in regard to issues such as education and occupation. Granly (1995) identified being future oriented as a positive force in unaccompanied refugee minors, while informants in the present study were found to be more focused on their current situation. Understandably it may be appropriate for this group to focus at the present time because it is too painful to think about the future which most probably is complex and insecure.

## Wide selection of coping strategies applied

### *Strategies similar to other groups of youths*

The six constructs of coping strategies identified in the present study were ‘support’, ‘cognitive restructuring’, ‘handle problems alone’, ‘avoidance’, ‘distraction’ and ‘active problem solving’. Hence it seems clear that the informants applied a wide selection of coping strategies. Behaviour categorized as seeking support and active problem solving are most frequently used, but also cognitive restructuring is applied extensively. Interestingly, the least used strategy is avoidance. This strategy has proved to be the most negative coping strategy (Compas et al., 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2004). On the other hand prior research has found behaviour categorized as seeking support, active problem solving and cognitive restructuring (used most frequently by the informants in the present study) to be effective and positive coping strategies to deal with problems (Compas et al., 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2004).

The coping constructs extracted from the empirical material fit well with the model of coping which Compas et al. (2001) described for late childhood and adolescence. The latter model includes three categories of coping strategies which parallels the constructs of coping found in this study. The first category involves ‘active coping’ efforts and covers the constructs of *active problem solving* and *support*. The second dimension involves ‘coping responses to adapt to the situation’, and covers the constructs of *cognitive restructuring* and *distraction*. The third dimension involves ‘coping efforts to avoid or disengage from the stressor or one’s emotions’, and covers the constructs of *avoidance*. The model of Compas et al. (2001) fit the results of the present study well, and lends support the idea that refugee youths in a vulnerable situation cope with their stressors in the same way as other children and youths.

Religion and religious beliefs has been identified as important contributors in the process of coping with hardship in comparable studies (Goodman, 2004; Granly, 1995; Sutton et al., 2006; Wallin & Ahlström, 2005). Surprisingly, religion is only mentioned by one of the informants in the present study, and is not referred to in relation to coping. One could hypothesize that informants do not like talking about their religious beliefs because it is part of the stigmatization of them. In a study by Fangen (2006) of Somalis in Norway, Somalis reported difficulties of living in a country which lack freedom of religion.

Even if the informants do not report seeking comfort in religious practices as a coping strategy, they appear to be construing their everyday in effective and positive ways. They

apply a wide range of coping strategies. This broad repertoire of coping skills and strategies may explain the results from earlier reports which claim that unaccompanied refugee minors after all function quite well. The present findings can also be related to the concept of agency found to be important for how people cope effectively with challenges (Gralinski-Bakker, Hausser, Stott, Billings & Allen, 2004). People who have a sense of agency tend to believe they can manage potentially difficult situations and control their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. As a result, they tend to engage actively in new challenges they face and to cope effectively with new demands; they also tend to set reasonable goals and to use their resources effectively (Gralinski-Bakker et al., 2004). Since almost all informants in the current study apply strategies of active problem solving it seems like they hold the characteristic of agency, and think their efforts will contribute to solve the problem. This capacity may prove decisive for unaccompanied refugee minors.

### ***Strategies which are characteristic for unaccompanied refugee minors***

It is noteworthy that the construct of 'handle problems alone' did not fit into the model of Compas et al. (2001). This may be the form of the coping behaviour where unaccompanied minors differ from other adolescents at the same age. Strategies like being self-reliant, keeping personal things to oneself, and struggle and fight to succeed are found both in the present and previous studies of unaccompanied minor refugees. When Granly (1995) interviewed unaccompanied minors about how they faced challenges in the process of adaptation in Norway, she examined coping in relation to the overall process of adaptation, and did not address situation specific coping. Still, her study identified strategies like 'being self-reliant' and 'never give up' as important contributions in the coping process. Clearly youths apply self instructions in ways of instructing themselves to relinquish.

Another part of the construct 'handle problems alone' is their wish to keep personal things to themselves. Informants seem to seek support, but not when issues of families are concerned. Social workers have noted that unaccompanied minors maintain silence about their past lives (Kohli, 2001). Results from the present study confirm this since strategies like keeping personal things to oneself often are mentioned in relation to longing for family. Kohli (2006) claims that this silence of their past lives both can be part of becoming autonomous and part of healing, as well as a way of hiding and managing hurt. Strategies of keeping personal things to oneself may therefore be both burdensome and protective (Kohli, 2006).

Struggling is also one of the coping strategies within ‘handle problems alone’. Informants were fighting and struggle to reach their goals, and also to survive. The present study and a study of unaccompanied refugee minors in Sweden have identified struggling as an important force in the process of coping. The majority of the participants in the Swedish study reported that they struggled every day during their first years in exile (Wallin & Ahlström, 2005).

These behaviours subsumed the construct of ‘handle problems alone’ point to the idea that aspects of this group’s coping strategies may differ from those of other children and youths’ because this group is facing challenges which may be unique for them and their situation. However, it may also be that the strategies referred above are widely applied also by other groups of youth, but that they are not captured by quantitative models like Compas et al. (2001).

### **Coping strategies applied in relation to specific situations**

When the use of the coping strategies in the present study was scrutinized in relation to the different difficulties, it emerged that the strategies varied depending on type of problem. Empirical findings confirm that youths have a tendency to choose coping strategies “customized” to the problem at hand (e.g. Bjorck et al, 2001; Gelhaar et al., 2007; Seiffge-Krenke & Shulman, 1990; Tam and Lam, 2005).

As already mentioned research has identified so-called adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, but whether coping strategies are adaptive or maladaptive may depend on the stressors and the situations they are used in relation to (Compas et al., 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2004). Participants in the present study apply mostly adaptive coping strategies according to the separation of adaptive and maladaptive strategies of coping. Also other studies in ethnic minority youths and western youths have found that adaptive coping strategies are used the most (Gelhaar et al., 2007; Tam and Lam, 2005). So-called maladaptive strategies such as avoidance e.g. trying to forget and suppress, are also applied in the present study. These have been shown to be related to increased stress and hence viewed as contributing negatively to youth’s situation (Compas et al., 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2004). Compas et al. (1993) claim that which coping strategy youth apply depends on whether the stressful event is interpersonal or non-interpersonal. The reason for applying different strategies for interpersonal events is because these events may be less controllable than non-interpersonal events and that the

uncontrollable nature of interpersonal stressors may elicit the use of more emotion-focused coping. Stressful events perceived as controllable are not surprisingly associated with increased use of problem-focused coping (Compas et al., 1993). Ajzen (2002) further states that the choice of coping strategy may rely upon perceived behavioural control; whether control is perceived as internal or external (Ajzen, 2002).

Unaccompanied refugee minors employ strategies that are typically considered maladaptive (e.g. avoidance coping) in relation to difficulties which actually make the strategies adaptive. Maladaptive strategies are mostly used in relation to problems of discrimination, but also in relation to poor economy. According to Compas et al. (1993) discrimination may be perceived as uncontrollable (due to external factors) because it is an interpersonal event. The informants may therefore apply emotion focused strategies aimed at reducing psychological discomfort by simply avoiding the harmful stimulus, to deal with the problem. Both avoidance and distraction are strategies aimed at reducing psychological discomfort. It has been found appropriate to use diverse strategies in relation to different problems. The strategies of wishful-thinking and avoidance were by Markstrom et al. (2000) found to be successfully employed for the types of problems that are irresolvable or that may disappear with time. These strategies are perhaps suitable for certain types of situations, like in relation to perceived discrimination (Markstrom et al., 2000). In relation to problems of poor economy in contrast, may strategies of avoidance still give a negative outcome (Compas et al., 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2004).

In summary the informants apply a wide selection of coping strategies. They tend to use mostly adaptive strategies, like support, cognitive restructuring and active problem solving. Even some of the typical maladaptive strategies applied in the present study may be functional for the informants because of the difficulties they are applied in relation to. This group of unaccompanied refugee minors seems to adapt their coping strategies to the problem at hand and utilize functional forms of coping. This ability points to the concept of resilience and positive adaptation despite severe adversity (Luthar et al., 2000).

## **Limitations**

In the present report the reader may miss the overall picture and interconnectedness of the coping strategies for the individual informants. However it was not a goal of the study to give idiographic portraits. Such descriptions and analyses would be more pertinent for therapeutic purposes, and with a therapeutic aim it would have been more useful with narrative analysis. However the present study was done more with prevention in mind, and therefore categorizations of difficulties and coping strategies may prove a useful starting point. At the same time such categorizations may conceal important nuances in problems and behaviour within each category, but this may be less critical for group-focused prevention, as compared to therapy where individualization is of paramount interest. With a group-focused aim the three types of difficulties were extracted for analysis on the background of frequency. Some unique problems, like problems in relation to school, love life and illness are therefore left out from the presentation of findings. The reason for this restriction was to detect possible coping patterns in relation to specific difficulties. In a larger sample, problems in relation to e.g. school could have been more prevalent.

It should also be noted that the interviews do not provide complete descriptions of coping strategies applied in relation to each problem. How extensive the descriptions of coping applied to each specific problem were, depended on the time spent talking about each problem. If three difficulties were brought up and discussed during one interview, less time was spent on each of these problems than if only one difficulty was brought up. This may have influenced the results to a certain degree. According to Compas et al. (2001) it is a major concern that adolescents may significantly underreport their coping responses because interviews rely on respondents' ability to remember or generate coping responses. Therefore, most likely the list of reported coping strategies is not exhaustive.

The context of these interviews may influence the content and what the participants choose to tell the interviewer. This study has not focused on the way these youths present themselves in the interviews. In studies on people's self-presentation, one of the most reliable findings is that people modify their behaviour in accordance with different social contexts. This behaviour includes talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Variation in self-presentation is particularly relevant in research where subjects can change e.g. their discourse to influence someone or to meet what they believe is the demand from the researcher. In a recent study of refugee youths selling drugs in Oslo, Sandberg and Pedersen (2006) found that youths gave



strategic presentations of themselves in the meeting with representatives for the welfare community. This way of presenting themselves provided them more public funds and support, and was therefore viewed as a kind of resource the youth possess (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2006). This form of “victim” discourse may also be found in the present material. It may be appropriate to present oneself as in need when meeting with interviewers who probably are viewed as being in connection with the social welfare system, for example making salient in the discourse that one has poor economy and difficulties getting a job. Hence it is at least a theoretical possibility that strategic self-presentation might explain why the problem of poor economy was brought up by so many of the interviewees.

It may also be worth noting the fact that it was young white females who interviewed adolescence boys from a completely different culture. The stories might have been very different if they were told to someone from the same gender and/or cultural group because these factors may influence the behaviour and openness of the interviewee. The study is further limited since participants were only interviewed once, thus providing only one telling instance. There is no way to know how the stories might have changed with retelling.

Since this qualitative study has examined coping only in ten Somali boys, the results may of course not be generalized to other nationalities or to Somali boys in comparable situations for that matter. However Somali immigrant youths have reported good mental health in previous studies (Oppedal et al., 2005). It is not known whether their nationality and cultural background is influencing their ability to cope with challenges or if the same results would be found in youth from another country.

### **Implications and perspectives**

As part of the globalization migration will be an important challenge in the years to come. In general more refugees and particularly unaccompanied minors will cross Norway’s borders. It is therefore necessary to gain knowledge about this group of young people in order to help them in their adaptation and prevent negative development. The informants in the present study seem to be a group of resourceful young men who are applying a wide variety of coping strategies. Bean et al. (2006) found that the perceived need for mental health care services among unaccompanied refugee minors in the Netherlands by far exceeds the rates among Dutch peers, but compares to other at-risk populations. Guardians and teachers tend to detect

emotional distress and mental health care needs only in a small proportion of the group, while as much as 49% of the unaccompanied refugee minors report that their need for mental health care was unmet (Bean et al., 2006). Therefore the intention of this presentation is not to argue against the elevated level of psychiatric symptoms in unaccompanied refugee minors. Rather, to argue that the fact that they dispose of and use of several different coping strategies may be one reason they function well in spite of adversities

These findings may be useful for the way in which professionals and public authorities deal with unaccompanied refugee minors. May professionals apply well intentioned ways of helping these youths that can create passive behaviour in them? All unaccompanied refugee minors who are settled in Norwegian municipalities receive help in one way or another. The municipalities in Norway are responsible for settling unaccompanied refugee minors after they are granted residence. The UDI recommends the municipalities that the child welfare and refugee-professionals are part of this process (IMDI, 2007). The municipalities settle unaccompanied refugee minors in different types of living arrangements according to their age (Eide, 2000). Informants report that they experienced hardships both economically and in relation to daily care when they lived in reception centres for asylum seekers upon arrival to Norway. Then they experienced better circumstances under the daily care of the child welfare. But then again, when they turned 18 or 20 years of age their situation reverted to the starting point. One may speculate that these narratives are a result of feelings of hopelessness after being dismissed from the child welfare in the age of eighteen years old. Findings then emphasize the importance of supporting the development of personal resources and coping strategies in unaccompanied refugee minors, also while they are under care of the child welfare.

Helping unaccompanied refugee minors can be done in different ways. Professionals should be aware of the risk for treating these children and youths only as victims which need help. Viewing them as primarily victims may contribute to a self-fulfilling oppression discourse where youths have to appear as victims to receive the help they need (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2006). Brickman, Rabinowitz, Karuza, Coates, Cohn and Kidder (1982) identified four models of helping and coping. The factors determining four fundamentally different orientations are whether or not people are held responsible for causing their problems, and whether or not they are held responsible for solving their problems. In one of the four models, the compensatory model, people are responsible for solutions, but not for the problems. According to Brickman et al. (1982) actors in this model will see themselves as deprived or as

suffering, not from their own deficiencies, but from the failure of their social environment to provide them with goods and services to which they are entitled. To solve their problems actors must be assertive. If they receive training, it is designed to empower them to deal more effectively with their environment. The strengths of the compensatory model in relation to coping is that it let people direct their energies outward, working on trying to solve problems. The recipients are not blamed for their problems, but praised for pursuing solutions. Professionals try to make sure that the help is received as something they need in order to discharge their official duties rather than something they need because of personal deficiency (Brickman et al., 1982). With respect to unaccompanied refugee minors the compensatory model might be useful. In this way of helping these youths, professionals will acknowledge unaccompanied refugee minors' personal resources, while at the same time being supportive and attentive to possible needs and meet these.

According to coping in unaccompanied refugee minors it is important that the child welfare and the specific caregivers of unaccompanied refugee minors are focused at and adequately trained to give these adolescent psychological "tools" (coping skills). The "toolbox" concept by Weisz & Hawley (2002), brought into use in a treatment program for youth depression may perhaps be extended to unaccompanied refugee minors (Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Mooijaart, & Spinhoven, 2006). This program aims to provide youth with coping skills such as active coping skills, adequate for their maturity level and situation. These coping skills should be viewed as tools in a toolbox, available when needed, but differing in their relative usefulness to different individuals in different situations and at different developmental levels (Weisz & Hawley, 2002).

### **Future research**

Knowledge from the present study may make it easier to develop appropriate questions in screening instruments. Given the information of how informants in the present study cope with their difficulties in the process of adaptation may make it easier to develop questionnaires which capture the strategies of coping applied by this group of youths.

The link between applied coping strategies and mental health of this group of youths has not been in focus in the present study. It would be highly interesting to study the connection between coping strategies brought into use and mental health in a larger sample of unaccompanied refugee minors.

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## APPENDIX A

### Intervjuguide

(Innledningen leses, men avsnittene som står i kursiv fortelles muntlig. Informant får utdelt eget ark hvor teksten i kursiv står og leser derfra.)

**Jeg heter..... Takk for at du ville være med på dette intervjuet. På samme måten som spørreundersøkelsen som du gjorde for..... siden, er dette intervjuet en del av UngKul undersøkelsen.**

Alle opplever av og til situasjoner som er vanskelige og problematiske. Dette intervjuet er en del av vår undersøkelse om hvordan ungdom vanligvis opplever og håndterer ulike problemer eller vanskeligheter. Det jeg først og fremst vil vite er hvordan du selv tenker om de vanskelighetene du har opplevd, hvordan du har håndtert dem, hvordan de har påvirket deg, hvordan det har vært for deg senere, og hvordan du tror du reagerer neste gang noe lignende skjer.

**For at jeg skal få meg alt du sier, blir samtalen tatt opp på lydbånd. Kanskje kommer jeg også til å notere litt underveis. Jeg har taushetsplikt, og det er ingen andre enn oss som jobber på dette prosjektet som får kjennskap til at det er du som har sagt det du forteller. Når resultatene fra denne undersøkelsen er ferdig vil ingen kunne skjønne at det er du som har sagt det du forteller.**

Ingen svar er riktige eller gale, og det er du som bestemmer hva du vil fortelle meg. Det jeg ønsker er å få tak i akkurat dine oppfatninger og erfaringer. Fortell med dine egne ord og på din egen måte. Hvis det er noe du lurer på underveis eller noe du ikke skjønner, er det bare å spørre.

Vi har ca 45 min/ tre kvarter på oss.

### **1. Kan du fortelle om noe som du synes er vanskelig for tiden?**

**(Hvis nei; kan du fortelle om noe som har vært vanskelig i løpet av det siste året eller de siste årene?)**

På hvilken måte påvirker dette ditt daglige liv?

(Gi konkrete eksempler. Hverdagen, relasjoner til andre, skole, følelser)

### **2. Hvordan har vanskeligheten oppstått?**

Hva tenker du om at du har slike problemer? (Hvordan ser du på det i dag?)

Hvorfor tror du de (familie, venner, andre hovedpersoner i episoden) handlet som de gjorde?

Finnes det noe annet, for eksempel opplevelser eller hendelser som du forbinder med at dette problemet startet?

Hva tenker du om dette?

### **3. Hvordan takler du denne vanskeligheten? /Hva gjør du med dette?**

Hva er den beste hjelpen for deg for at du skal kunne takle dette?

Hva hindrer deg i å håndtere den?

Hva skulle vært annerledes for at du skulle håndtere belastningen bedre?

Hva er det som får deg til å gjøre noe/ikke gjøre noe med dette problemet/belastningen?

(konkrete eksempler?)

Har du søkt hjelp, støtte eller råd hos noen?

Hvorfor, hvorfor ikke?

Hvordan hadde det vært hvis du ikke hadde gjort det?

Har det hjulpet/ Hva har du fått ut av det?

Er det noe annet som skulle kunne hjelpe deg?

Er det andre ting du kan gjøre selv?

Hva kan andre gjøre for å hjelpe deg? (Vet de at du ønsker denne hjelpen fra dem?)

Hva kan det komme av at du håndterer denne vanskeligheten slik som du har beskrevet?

Hvordan tror du andre ville håndtere dette problemet? (på samme måte eller annerledes?)

Hvordan har dette påvirket deg?

Når du tenker på situasjonen framover, hvordan tror du dette vil bli? (i.f.t. dette problemet?)

#### **(Hvis ingen mestring kommer fram)**

Hvordan pleier du å takle problemer?

Er det slik du vanligvis mestrer problemer?

Hva er det som skjer når du... (ikke mestrer f.eks. når du er sjenert)?

I hvilke situasjoner er du.../ er du ikke (mestrer ikke)?

Hvis du ønsket å få til (det du ikke får til), hvordan kunne du ha gått fram?

Er det noe annet du har greid bra?)

### **4. Hvordan kan du håndtere lignende vanskeligheter i framtiden?**

Hva ville være annerledes hvis dette skjedde igjen?

Hvis du ville at det skulle være på en annen måte, hva skal da til?

Har du gjort noe for at lignende ting ikke skal oppstå i framtiden?

Hva ønsker du at skal være din situasjon om 5 år?  
Hva må du gjøre for å komme dit?

Når den vanskelige situasjonen pågår nå; Når du tenker framover, hvordan kommer du til å tenke på situasjonen du opplever nå?

**5. Er det noe annet jeg bør vite for å forstå? (evnt. Noe annet du synes jeg bør vite?)**

Hvordan synes du dette intervjuet har vært?  
Var det noe du synes det var vanskelig å snakke om?

Har du noen spørsmål til meg før vi avslutter?



## APPENDIX B

### Definitions of phenomena

#### Discrimination

Hard to get a job: informants feel that employers are judging them negatively because of their background.

Treated different: informants refer to different kinds of experiences where they are treated different because of their background. For example that people are staring at them or that people think they are selling drugs in the street.

Feel uncomfortable in lines in front of passport check: informants have felt uncomfortable when they are standing in long lines when they are arriving Norway which they look upon as their home country.

Racial harassment from Norwegian foster father: informant got racist comments from foster father

Difficult to get to know Norwegians: at school, in work or in general

Excluded from sportsteam: informant experienced that he was kicked out from the sportsteam because of his background.

Difficult to learn Norwegian because Norwegians don't understand: informant had very difficult to be understood by Norwegians and felt that they didn't want to understand him.

#### Economy

Citizenship is expensive: informant wants to visit his homecountry, but need citizenship to do this, and cannot afford it

Difficult to survive: Informants experience that it is difficult to make a living of the money they have.

Quitting sport: The sports team was travelling to play games and the informant couldn't afford this and had to quit.

Sending money home: informants are getting problems with their economy because they are sending money to their families

Borrowed money: informant borrowed so much money from friends that he got problems with paying them back.

Getting ill from thoughts: Informants tell that he can think so much about his economy that he is getting ill.

Difficult to spend time with Norwegian youths because they spend a lot of money: informant tells that he prefer to spend time with minority boys because he cannot afford to do the things Norwegian youths are doing.

Cannot afford right medical treatment: the medical treatment informant need for his health is too expensive for him.

#### Longing for family

Missing: informants say that they are missing their families

Lack of concentration: informants experience problems with concentration in school because they are missing their families.

Worries: informants are worried for family members

Afraid of being too Norwegian: informant is worried that he will get too Norwegian so that it will be difficult for him to return to his home country later

Refusal of family reunion: informants applied for reunion with the family, but was refused

Family member disappeared: because of refusal of application for political asylum. The informant is missing this person.

Loneliness: informants are saying they are lonely

## **Support**

Talking to friends: getting support by talking to friends

Talking to family in Norway: getting support by talking to family

Talking to adults in Norway: the adults could be the boss, their friends' parents or other grown ups they know in Norway

Talking to guardian: the person they received as their guardian when they arrived Norway.

Talking to school nurse: about personal problems

Talking to family in homecountry: on the phone

Talking to teacher: about problems in school

Talking to colleagues: informant tells about how important his colleagues are for his everyday life, and how they are making him happy when he is sad.

Talking to officials: Informants use to contact persons they know in childrens welfare or the social services when they are in trouble. Either because they need to talk or because they are in need of money. (child welfare; called in acute situation, talking and getting support, asking for economical support)

Help from friends: with getting a job or friends lending them money

Support from Somalian youth organization: informant tells how being part of this organization is making him less lonely.

## **Cognitive restructuring**

Used to it: Informants are saying that they are used to the problem. It was worse in the beginning.

Otherwise it's good: informants are claiming that they are doing fine except from this problem

It's not just me: Others are having the same problem as me

It was worse in Somalia: informants say that they find it better to stay in Norway than in Somalia among others because of their possibilities to education, place to stay and resources Norway.

Thinking positively: informants are choosing to think positively because they think it's important for their lives.

Proud of who I am: informants are saying that they are proud of themselves

Thankful: informants are grateful for the possibilities they are getting in Norway

Hoping things get better: descriptions of how informants hope that things will get after a while

Thinking of possible solutions: informant is actively thinking about the problem and tries to find solutions for the problem

Learn of ones mistakes: informant tells about how he is conscious of always learning from his mistakes

It will be ok when I get older: Informants think that they will be able to handle their situation better when they get older.

Can get help if I need it: the knowledge of that the help is near if he needs it difficult, or directly saying that he is thinking positively.

They are just jealous: informant is explaining discrimination with jealousy

Explaining discrimination with culture and fear: informant is explaining discrimination with the Norwegian culture and peoples fear to what is different.

I can't do anything about it: the informant can relax because it is nothing he can do about his problem

Dreams about the future: informants are dreaming of how the future can be

Help others: informants are getting motivation to struggle because of their goal of helping someone in the future

High education: informant is struggling towards his goal of getting a master degree or doctoral degree

### **Handle problems alone**

Fighting/struggling: informants tell how they will succeed if they are fighting hard enough

Be self-reliant: informants describe the need to rely on their selves

Never give up: informant say he will never give up

Keeping personal things to oneself: informants report that they are keeping their problems for themselves instead of talking to people about it.

Doing nothing: Informants describe that they are not doing anything with the problem

### **Avoidance**

Forget: trying to forget

Suppression: trying not to think about it

Stop speaking Norwegian: informant tells about how he didn't speak Norwegian for almost three years because he wanted to avoid people that didn't understand him

### **Distraction**

Physical exercise: e.g. playing football because it help informants to think of something else than the problem

Music: listening to music because it help informants to think of something else than the problem

Seeing friends: because it help informants to think of something else than the problem

Playstation: Playing Playstation because it makes the informant think of something else than the problem

Fresh air: going for a walk because it helps the informant think of something else than the problem

Work: informant fills up his time with work so he don't have time to think of the problem

Schoolwork: doing homework to avoid thinking of the problem

Physical exercise: informant describe how he is "emptying" his self by running or playing football.

### **Active problem solving**

Seeking family reunion: Trying to get their families to Norway

Trace family in Somalia: Trying to find their family in Somalia by talking to people from Somalia in Norway and Sweden

Visit family in Africa: Informants have visited their family in Africa

Send money: Send money to their families in Somalia

Use little money: Saving money by living cheap. Informants describe how their lives consist of going to school, doing homework and go to bed. They don't have money for e.g. cinema.

Working hard with schoolwork: informants describe how they are using a lot of time on schoolwork to get a good education that will help them get a job later

Working hard to earn money: taking an extra job to earn enough money

Seeking actively for a job: attending courses for how to write an application and being active in trying to find a job

Try to get in contact with Norwegians: Informant describe how he is taking contact with Norwegians he is meeting in the street because he need to practice his Norwegian

Adapt and integrate: descriptions of how the informant is trying to adapt to the Norwegian society

Try to move to another class: Informant is asking the teacher to stay in another class because he has no friends

Go early to bed: informant is going early to bed because he has problems with waking up early enough to go to work

Change religion: Informant wants to change religion because he thinks Christians can do what they want. It will be easier for him to be Christian.

Quit school: Informant wants to quit school to get the chance to work and get the money he needs.

Playing on a gambling machine: informant is trying to earn money by using a gambling machine because he can't get a job

Spending time with minority youths: informant is spending time with minority youths in stead of Norwegian youths because it is cheaper. The Norwegian youths are using so much money when they are seeing each other and the informant can not afford it.

### **Difficulties which did not fit into constructs of 'discrimination', 'economy' and 'longing for family'**

Theme	Undertheme	Phenomenon	
Stressors	Moving	Difficult to find new friends in a new place 1	1
		Suddenly had to move 1	1
		Moving alone in own apartment 1	1
	Others	Dropped out of school because of illness 1	1
		Feeling rootless 1	1
		Love problems 1	1
		Little help from the child welfare 1	1
		Difficult to perform well in school 2	2
		Difficult to get up in the mornings 1	1
		Afraid of being a criminal 1	1